

Rehabilitating the Baringo Drylands of Kenya



Mwalimu the "teacher" bull. (Photo courtesy of RAE Charitable Trust)

2001-06-15

Mike Crawley

A bull called Mwalimu helped save the lives of hundreds of cattle in Kenya's Baringo District during a recent drought.

Mwalimu means "teacher" in Swahili and this bull taught other cattle to do something that does not come naturally to them — eat cactus. Two successive years of drought had so much reduced the amount of fodder available in Baringo that cattle were starving to death. So, when staff from the Rehabilitation of Arid Environments (RAE), a charitable trust organization, heard about a bull that was eating cactus, they bought him and took him around the district to show hungry cows that they, too, could eat cactus once the thorns were burned off.

Cactus-eating cows

"The cows were willing to get on with it, but the people sometimes weren't," says Murray Roberts, RAE's Executive Director. Still, Mwalimu's cactus-eating behaviour was demonstrated directly to more than 150 cattle, and it's believed that the practice spread to many more herds.

RAE, which is supported by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and other donors, has a history of showing people that what might seem impossible can actually happen. Its work centres on the semi-arid Lake Baringo basin, about 300 kilometres northwest of the capital, Nairobi. Its primary activity involves reclaiming chunks of severely degraded land and turning them into productive fields, providing graphic proof that desertification is reversible, but this can only be sustained if the land is managed properly.

Grazing 'free-for-all'

In the past, elders of the semi-pastoralist Tugen, Pokot, and Njemps ethnic groups, which are indigenous to the Baringo area, would regulate their cattle's grazing, says Dr Elizabeth Meyerhoff, RAE's co-director and a social anthropologist. But social changes — along with growing human and livestock populations — gradually eroded the powers of the elders and increased pressure on the land. Meanwhile, Kenya's post-independence government has not yet formalized the Baringo peoples' title to their traditional grazing lands, as was done elsewhere in Kenya under the group

ranch system, in which land is collectively owned. These factors have combined to create a grazing 'free-for-all' in the area, in which community members have little incentive to manage the land with an eye to the future.

"If people had title deeds on their lands, they would probably look after them better," stresses Roberts.

RAE's approach

RAE's technique for rehabilitating land involves meeting with community members to identify denuded spots that they wish to reclaim, fencing off the property, preparing the land with a water harvesting system, planting drought-resistant trees and grass species, and working with the community to carefully manage land use, with environmental sustainability as the goal.

As part of this participatory approach, field management committees are elected from community members and given the mandate to regulate field use, such as whose livestock can graze on the fenced property, and for how long, with advice from RAE staff. Building the capacity of these committees to manage communal resources sustainably and equitably is one of the main goals of IDRC's funding.

Success story

Michael Lekoipiri is chairman of the management committee for the first field that RAE rehabilitated back in 1982. "It was just barren land," he says. Yet, in a matter of months, the field sprouted grass. Eventually, community members were able to fatten their sheep on the field during the dry season, a practice that in some cases has doubled the money the owners have earned from their sheep.

"Many people benefited," says Lekoipiri. "The money from the sheep and the grass seed paid for school fees and food for the families."

Impacts

RAE has recovered about 1,700 hectares of community land in this way, increasing biodiversity and halting soil erosion. Its statistics show that on average, nearly 1,000 families benefit annually from the recovered land. Some management committees have decided to allow women to harvest seed from the grass, giving them a previously untapped source of cash income. Some committees have opened bank accounts and are paying part of the salary of the field recorders employed by RAE to monitor field use activity. Pastoralists from other parts of Kenya have traveled to Baringo to observe RAE's work and are duplicating the techniques on their own territories.

"My dream is to see all semi-arid pastoralist areas become productive and be managed properly," says Roberts. In recent years, RAE has focused its efforts on helping small-scale farmers rehabilitate land that they control. The idea came from the communities themselves, which started fencing off small areas around their homesteads in an effort to copy the success of reclaimed communal fields. The private control of land — something alien to most pastoralist communities — can improve the quality of pasture with careful management. So far, 85 hectares of 'private fields' have been reclaimed for 93 owners, including one women's group.

Toward sustainability

"Since I began planting this grass, I have not moved my cattle in search of pasture," says Wilson Chebungei, one of the first people to plant a private field with RAE's help. "I have also been able to feed over 20 cattle for four years without moving."

Still, one of the challenges is persuading pastoralists to keep a sustainable number of livestock. "This used to be very good land, but it has become severely degraded due to too many livestock and mismanagement," says Paul Parsalaach, RAE's field operations manager. "The communities have started realizing that grazing too many livestock is a problem."

Environmental degradation

Parsalaach recalls from his childhood in the 1960s and 70s that Baringo was not always so degraded. "There were birds singing everywhere in this place. Wildlife were here. We could drink water straight from Lake Baringo, we could even see through it."

Today, safeguarding the health of Lake Baringo is a major concern for RAE. Overgrazing in the surrounding lowlands and logging in the highlands are causing severe soil erosion, which in turn has caused heavy siltation in the lake. "If something is not done soon, the lake will not be here, at least not in its current form," concludes Roberts.

Mike Crawley, reporting from Kampi ya Samaki, Kenya.

For more information:

Murray Roberts and Dr Elizabeth Meyerhoff, RAE Charitable Trust, PO Box 1051, Nakuru, Kenya; Phone: (254) 328-51418; Email: roberts@users.africaonline.co.ke

Dr Eva Rathgeber, Research Fellow, Evaluation Unit, IDRC, 250 Albert Street, PO Box 8500, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3H9; Phone: (613) 236-6163, ext 2486; Email: erathgeber@idrc.ca